

A scenic view of a harbor at sunset. Several small boats are docked in the water, and a stone wall is visible in the foreground on the right. The sky is a mix of orange and blue, with some clouds. The overall mood is peaceful and serene.

Sacred Journeys:

A GLIMPSE OF INFINITY

By Catherine Ann Lombard



AN EARNEST EXPLORATION OF JAPAN'S SPIRITUAL TREASURES LEADS TO A MAGICAL EXPERIENCE OF MERGING WITH ONENESS.

After graduating from the University of California, Berkeley in 1987, I moved to Fukuyama, Japan—about 400 miles south of Tokyo—to teach English. People often ask why I decided to go to Japan, but the reality is that Japan chose me. At that time, I longed to take a year off and travel abroad. After I applied for English teaching positions in more than 50 countries, the school in Fukuyama was the one that invited me to come.

I arrived knowing only three words in Japanese: *hajimemashite* (nice to meet you), *arigatoo* (thank you), and *sayonara* (goodbye), thanks to a Japanese friend who helped me learn some helpful phrases before I left. I practiced constantly.


I ended up staying two years in this beautiful country. I learned to speak Japanese and to read enough of the language to decipher grocery labels and train schedules, and I was blessed with making many Japanese friends, some of whom I am still in touch with 35 years later.

Even so, there's no doubt that the first months were difficult. One of my biggest fears was getting on the wrong train, traveling for miles in the wrong direction, and then not knowing how to ask for help. I struggled daily with looking different from everyone else around me. At home in the United States, I was a short, nondescript woman in her early 30s. In Japan, I was considered tall and beyond marriageable age, with a face intriguing enough to surreptitiously sneak a glance at on a packed train.

My determination to fit into this complex society was partly driven by what I immediately perceived to be its spiritual treasures. The sparkling view of Mount Fuji, ikebana (flower arranging) lessons that helped me to appreciate natural beauty, and visits to Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples all propelled me to long for a profound understanding of this ancient Eastern world.

THE CALLIGRAPHY LESSON

One afternoon I was invited to participate in a calligraphy class, or *shodo*, which translated means “the way of beautiful writing.” Our teacher, Mr. Suzuki, was a prestigious calligrapher who had earned numerous honors throughout his lifetime.



He started with the basics: “Hold the brush with two fingers. Your elbow must be parallel with the table. Sit with your spine straight. Take a deep breath. Concentrate.”

We watched attentively as he demonstrated how three *kanji* characters—the moon, the sun, and light—had progressed through 4,000 years of Chinese and Japanese history. He then gave us our first assignment. Breathless, I hesitated, my brush heavy with ink hovering over the mulberry paper.

“As soon as you touch the brush to the paper, it is done,” Mr. Suzuki instructed. “Continue with determination. *Shodo* is meditation in action.”

I took a deep breath and tried to imagine ancient Japanese poetry flowing through my brush. I did my best, but the precise strokes of the brush, the meticulous spacing of the characters, and the controlled freedom of the movement all seemed to elude me.

Once our lesson was completed, Mr. Suzuki assured us, “As you study *shodo*, you become aware of the universal creative forces all around you.”

And so, with patience and determination, I slowly began to unravel Japan’s rhythms, charms, and incongruities—the gracious and fully conscious rituals around gift-giving, their joyous singing and eating sushi under the springtime cherry blossoms, the countryside’s shimmering rice fields poised against the throbbing, bustling noise and lights of Tokyo. Not to mention the wonder of all their other ancient arts like tea ceremony, sumo, and archery—all rooted in Buddhist Zen teachings.

A RENDEZVOUS IN KYOTO

Perhaps I have Takeshi to thank for initiating me into this deeper understanding of such an enigmatic and unique people and culture. Before I left, my brother gave me the name and address of a friend of his from business school who lived in Tokyo. Soon after settling

in, I contacted him and introduced myself. He replied with the suggestion that I meet him in Kyoto, where he was planning a business trip. During the weekend, he would have time to accompany me through the ancient capital city.


I happily agreed to this idea. Kyoto is renowned for its numerous temples and shrines. Surrounded by mountains and graced with bamboo gardens and philosopher paths, Kyoto seems to hold the essence of Japan. With a guiding hand, I hoped to touch this essence.

When Takeshi and I met, it was early February, a blustery cold month that the Japanese calendar marked as the beginning of spring. While riding the *shinkansen* (bullet train), my thoughts flowed with the passing scenes. Farmers tapped stakes into the winter ground with round wooden mallets and carried away the dried rice straw. Futons aired outside apartment balconies, and when folded over clotheslines, they looked like giant cotton sandwiches. A mother scurried by with her child while a grandmother, curled over like a bent bonsai from a lifetime of fieldwork, hurried home from the market. Uniformed school children joked together as they rode their bicycles.

Takeshi met me at the Kyoto train station with a wide smile. Gentle-voiced with high cheek bones, he wore a gray trench coat, standard attire for an international banker, and his jet-black hair was flecked with gray, as if he had accidentally splattered himself while painting a room white. Meanwhile, I exulted in talking with a Japanese person fluent in English after four months of listening to my students struggle with simple, everyday phrases.

VISITS TO ANCIENT BUDDHIST TEMPLES

The next morning, when I opened the frosted windows of my hotel room, I could hear the coo of mourning doves mingled with the soothing trickle of a

A vertical photograph of a winter landscape. In the foreground, dark, jagged rock formations are silhouetted against a sky filled with falling snow. Below the rocks, a town or village is visible, its buildings and streets partially obscured by the snow. In the background, dark mountains rise against a lighter, snow-filled sky. The overall scene is serene and atmospheric, capturing a moment of quiet beauty in a snowy environment.

waterfall. Takeshi and I first visited the dimly lit temple halls of Sanjusangen-do, where 1,001 serene Kannon figures (a revered Buddhist female figure on the path to enlightenment) lined the wooden floors. Later that afternoon, fat snowflakes swirled around us while we strolled through an ancient tea garden in the nearby hills. I stood spellbound in front of a plum tree in bloom. Petals from swollen pink blossoms undauntedly fluttered in the snow.

That night I slept heavily and dreamt I was walking over a lush green mountaintop with pilgrims. The air tingled my skin and nose, and the earth seemed to pulsate beneath me. The pilgrims were on their way to pay homage at a shrine, their rich voices singing prayers in Japanese. I couldn't understand the lyrics, but the melody was innately familiar, and in the dream I sang with them, creating English words to accompany the tune.

That morning, I awoke to find Kyoto covered with a thin blanket of snow. The century-old wooden houses were glistening in the winter sunshine. Both Takeshi and I were excited to see the snow and bundled up before catching a bus to Sanzen-in, a renown temple dating from 860 A.D., that was tucked away in the mountains. Upon arriving, we found the snow piled high, the sky deep blue, and the air biting. After we entered the temple, the robed monks led us, along with other visitors, to a room with low tables. Sitting at the tables, we were given the day's *sutra* written on handmade, cream-colored paper. The monk then invited us to meditate and trace the *kanji sutra*.

On the same piece of paper, we were also asked to write down a personal goal. At the end of each day, the monks collected these papers and burnt them with incense. I remembered Mr. Suzuki's instructions during my *shodo* class. "Sit with your spine straight. Take a deep breath. Concentrate. *Shodo* is meditation in action." Once my mind felt clear, I traced the *sutra*

and waited for a goal to enter my heart. Finally, I wrote: "To grow wise with age," and Takeshi drew the *kanji* for peace, the character depicting a stalk of rice next to a mouth—everyone satiated in all ways.

AN INNER DOOR OPENS

Takeshi then walked over to a shoji door. The mulberry paper meticulously covered its cross-lattice bamboo frame and seemed alive with sunlight. "*San ... ni ... ichi*. Three ... two ... one." He counted backward and then slid the door wide open.

I was stunned. The garden beyond the door was unworldly in its beauty. At that moment, I lost all consciousness of self and became one with everything, even one with light. As in my dream, it was the summation of forgotten songs chanted by ancient ones suddenly understood. The manicured pine trees and carefully placed stones seemed captive in snow, frozen in time. Iridescent greens, blues, and oranges flickered before me. I felt as if I had finally, breathlessly, arrived in Japan.

Regaining consciousness, I found myself moved to tears. It felt almost as if, as Mr. Suzuki has said, I had become "aware of the universal creative forces" all around me. For only a split-second, I had transcended time and space and momentarily encountered a limitless universe. Yet, at the same time, I felt as if I had been gone for days. A monk's voice floated toward me in a soothing rush of monosyllables. The air tasted sweet and cold. A stream of melted water ran beneath the snow.

Takeshi offered me his arm, and we stepped into the temple's garden. Pine trees occasionally shook piles of snow off their boughs onto our heads, as if to mock our awkward humanness.

Since that time, I have indeed aged. As for growing wise, that remains a work in progress. But one thing is certain—this brief glimpse of the invisible through the visible reverberates through my soul today. 🌸